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AUTHOR Beale, Calvin L.
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ABSTRACT

U.S. Census data (1970-74) comparing population trends in the West were analyzed in reference to the recent urban to rural migration patterns exemplified by a total U.S. metropolitan population growth of 3.4 percent vs a nonmetropolitan growth of 5.6 percent (1970-74). In the West it was found that: (1) population increased 6.9 percent with somewhat less than half that increase coming from inmovement; (2) rural areas had shifted from net outmovement in the 60's to substantial inmovement in the 70's, rural growth being highest in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas and counties having lower growth rates still demonstrating a growth of 9.2 percent, a rate double that of the U.S. average; (3) rural growth was occasioned by recreational and retirement communities, an increasing American Indian population, mining and manufacturing industry, and state institutions; (4) of the 65 counties with decreased populations, roughly half were in the Great Plains area; (5) the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas had lost 39,000 people, but other western metropolitan areas had had just as much inmigration since 1970 as they had had in the 60's; (6) the rural migrant tended to be characterized as intermediate in terms of his area of origin and destination; (7) while rural migration may improve communities, it may also present environmental problems (water, pollution, land use), but the trend is such that it cannot be ignored. (JC)

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THE WESTERN ASPECT OF RENEWED NONMETROPOLITAN POPULATION GROWTH IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Calvin L. Beale
Economic Research Service, USDA

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The Western Rural Development Center
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon 97331
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The Western Aspect of Renewed Nonmetropolitan Population Growth in the United States

Calvin L. Beale
Economic Research Service, USDA

In the last year it has become rather well publicized that the trend toward increasing concentration of the American people in large urban areas seems to have halted, with the highest rates of population growth now in rural and small town areas. The recent availability of 1974 population estimates for all counties makes it possible to appraise this phenomenon in the West. However, a look at the national picture is in order first.

Our total population is not growing very rapidly, because the birth rate has fallen. From April 1970 to July 1974, the U.S. population increased only by 4.0 percent, or less than 1 percent per year compounded. In the same time, the metropolitan population grew by 3.4 percent and the nonmetropolitan by 5.6 percent. In general, metropolitan areas consist of counties containing urban settlements of 50,000 or more people, plus any adjoining counties that meet certain standards of metropolitan character and commuting to the central county. We have no previous record of the population growth rate in rural and small town nonmetropolitan counties ever exceeding that in the metropolitan counties, with the possible exception of a brief time during the heart of the 1930's depression.

The extent of the turnaround that we have had nationally in the 1970's can be grasped from the fact that the nonmetropolitan counties experienced 3.0 million net outmovement from 1960-70, but had a net inmovement of 1.6 million people from 1970-74. This change is so widespread that it seems to have affected 48 of the 50 States.

In the Western region, the population increased by 6.9 percent from 1970-74, a rate well above the national growth. Somewhat less than half of the recent increase in the West's population has come from movement of people into the region, and the rest from excess of births over deaths.

As in the U.S. as a whole, the population has grown more rapidly in the nonmetropolitan areas of the West than in the metropolitan ones. Both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas have experienced net inmovement of people. However, on an annual basis, the metropolitan areas were receiving little more than half as much inmovement as they had in the 1960's, whereas the nonmetropolitan areas had shifted from net outmovement in the 1960's to substantial inmovement in the 1970's.

It can be seen from the table that nonmetropolitan growth was highest in the counties that are adjacent to metropolitan areas. Some of these counties have started the process of becoming metropolitan, as the sprawl of settlement out from the major cities continues. However, metropolitan boundaries are rather generous in the West, because of the large size of counties, and most of the adjacent group are still quite rural in character.

The more remote nonmetropolitan Western counties that are not adjacent to a metropolitan area had a somewhat lower rate of population growth. But note that they shifted from sizeable outmovement in the 1960's to inmovement in the 1970's, and experienced a total growth of 9.2 percent from 1970-74--a rate more than double the U.S. average.

The circumstances of growth in the rural and small town areas of the West vary. A number of counties have high growth associated with resort, second home, and retirement activities. This is common, for example, in western Arizona, the Sierra Nevada foothills, southern New Mexico, the Puget Sound country, and the western slopes of the Rockies in Colorado. Another class of rapidly growing counties is those containing relatively high proportions of American Indians, such as in the Navajo country. Here and there are mining boom counties, such as in the oil areas of eastern Utah or northern Alaska, or coal areas of Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. The number of such counties will probably rise as the decade proceeds. Other rapidly growing nonmetropolitan counties reflect the location of State capitals, State colleges, and manufacturing developments. In many cases the Western counties with high growth rates have rather small population bases. Nonetheless, the local impact is substantial.

At the other extreme are counties that are declining in population. The region is so huge that there is always diversity in its trends. The high average population growth of the nonmetropolitan areas, masks the fact that 65 nonmetropolitan counties decreased in population from 1970-1974. Roughly half of them are in the Great Plains, especially in eastern Colorado and Montana. In these areas there is a high dependency on agriculture. Farm and ranch manpower needs are still slowly dwindling and alternative sources of work have not been developed fast enough to offset this problem. In addition, the character of the Great Plains and the distance from major population centers have not fostered the resort-retirement activity so common in many other parts of the region.

In recent years the nonmetropolitan areas of the West appear to have grown in part from the redirection of movement that once went to the two major metropolitan areas of the region. Thus, for example, the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco areas gained 1.6 million net migrants in the 1960's. (This includes the peripheral San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura, Orange County, San Jose, and Vallejo-Napa areas in addition to the core areas.) But from 1970-74 these same areas ceased to attract migrants collectively and lost 39,000 people by net outmigration. This is a major change. If the data for recent events in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas are deducted from the metropolitan totals, one finds that the rest of the metropolitan population in the West has had just as much inmigration since 1970 on an annual basis as it had in the 1960's. In effect the small and medium-scale metropolitan areas are behaving demographically more like the nonmetropolitan areas than like the two super areas of the region. This distinction is quite characteristic of the rest of the United States as well.

We have no firm information on the individual characteristics of people moving into the rural and small town areas of the West. At the national level, surveys show that such migrants tend to be intermediate between their areas of origin and destination in the basic features of education,

occupational mix, and income. This has the interesting result of raising socio-economic status averages at both ends of the migration stream. My judgment is that this pattern would also hold true for the West.

The implications of more rapid and widespread nonmetropolitan growth vary with the situation and with the perspective of the viewer. In a sparsely settled area, growth may introduce potential efficiencies into governmental expenditures. It may bring about the minimum mass of population needed to support a particular business or public facility. If an area has been declining previously, the turnaround may normalize the age distribution of the community and improve the rather morbid self image or public reputation that a chronically declining area acquires. Growth may make it economically feasible for many more of the young people growing up in an area to make their homes there, if that is their preference.

On the other hand, the West is a peculiarly fragile region in its environment. The deserts, high mountain areas, semi-humid plains, or Alaskan areas all have limiting features which constrain the nature and extent of settlement. Rapid growth creates problems for any community if sustained long enough. But in the West its impact on water use or pollution or on the debate over the proper use of the region's vast public lands quickly leads to concern about the value of population growth.

We cannot say how long the current trend will extend into the future, but it does appear to have a fairly strong momentum. The widespread character of nonmetropolitan growth and the variety of factors causing it insure that it is more than a transient fad.

Population change by residence for the West

Residence	Population			Net migration	
	1974	1970	Percentage change, 1970-74	1970-74	1960-70
	Thou.	Thou.	Pct.	Thou.	Thou.
West Region	37,243.0	34,837.9	6.9	1,143.0	2,849.5
Metropolitan 1/	29,636.1	27,938.9	6.1	702.3	3,069.2
Greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Areas 2/	14,816.3	14,406.5	2.8	-39.2	1,648.9
Rest of metropolitan	14,819.8	13,532.4	9.5	741.5	1,420.3
Nonmetropolitan	7,606.9	6,899.0	10.3	440.7	-219.7
Nonmetropolitan					
Adjacent counties 3/	3,124.0	2,794.7	11.8	227.7	98.5
Nonadjacent counties	4,482.9	4,104.3	9.2	213.0	-318.2

1/ Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA's) as defined by Office of Management and Budget as of 1974.

2/ The Los Angeles and San Francisco Areas are defined as follows: Los Angeles Area comprises Los Angeles-Long Beach, Anaheim-Santa Ana-Garden Grove, Oxnard-Ventura, and Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario SMSA's; San Franscisco Area comprises San Francisco-Oakland, San Jose, and Vallejo-Napa SMSA's.

3/ Nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to SMSA's.

Source: Current Population Reports, Federal-State Cooperative Program for Population Estimates, Series P-26 and Population Estimates and Projections, Series P-25. U.S. Bureau of the Census.